



Roundtable Mentor,
Stephanie Choquette,
AVP, Innovation & Real
Estate at MD Financial
Management, shared
her strategies for dealing
with a stressful situation
involving multiple levels of
management.

Mentoring **MATTERS**

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I'm currently working on a project for my boss's boss and it's causing issues. My boss isn't getting along with his boss and I feel caught in between. How can I manage both agendas (which seem to be conflicting!)

Let me take you back to the situation that comes to mind when I think about this question. I was in the first few years of my career when I offered to take on an enterprise project that I was keenly interested in. It turns out my leader's leader was the sponsor of the initiative. I was excited to work with her – I felt I had a unique perspective to contribute and I couldn't wait to get started. In the name of speed and efficiency, I set up some time with her and got aligned on the goals of the initiative as well as the timeline.

It had not occurred to me to involve my leader in those first few meetings. My leader and I worked well together – and I was trying to respect his time and demonstrate that I had the necessary leadership to move the project forward independently. While I've always been respectful of the chain of command, I have also always challenged myself to find opportunities to work with people with differing perspectives and styles of leadership so that I can keep learning and stay agile. I was looking forward to working with this sponsor since I wanted to learn from her and I wanted her to see what I was capable of.

Over the first few weeks of the project, I was picking up on some vibes from my immediate leader. When I would bring up the project, there was a distinct energy change that I couldn't quite put my finger on. He would get dismissive when I brought up progress around this project – and that was uncharacteristic of him. I started to tell myself some stories: maybe he didn't like the progress that I was making; maybe he wanted someone else to lead the project; maybe he didn't believe the initiative was worthwhile.

I found that honesty and curiosity were key for me in navigating that situation.

After a few meetings where the dismissiveness continued, I decided to get curious and lean in. I shared with my leader that I'd noticed the last few times I brought up this specific project, I observed that he seemed a bit frustrated about the progress – was there anything I needed to know or change to ensure I was steering it in the right direction?

He then apologized and told me that he had proposed this same initiative last year after months of lobbying and research, and it did not have his leadership team's support. He didn't understand why the initiative that he had worked so hard to start was now being championed by someone else and he hadn't been asked to lead it or even be part of it.

I acknowledged how that must be frustrating given he had done so much research around the initiative and since he had so much passion for it. I then spent some time asking him a few questions:

- Why was this project so important?
- What did success look like?
- What might the key success factors be?

I found that as soon as I got curious, the dismissiveness disappeared, and it became clear he was telling himself his own stories that were clouding his perspective. He apologized for taking out his frustration on me since his anger was with his leader – not with me. And he acknowledged he needed to have a conversation with his leader to understand more about why he wasn't asked to champion it.

We left the conversation having cleared the air so that I could get back to work on the project. And as a result, he could let go of some of the frustration he'd been holding onto.

In reflecting back on this situation (and many others since then), I have found that if I approach situations with honesty, good intention & curiosity, I generate better outcomes and create stronger, mutually respectful work relationships.



Stephanie Choquette is the AVP, Innovation & Real Estate at MD Financial Management. MD Financial provides best-in-class financial advice and solutions for Canadian Physicians and their families. The organization has 1,500 team members across Canada and has received several awards for Best Workplace Culture and Best Leadership Development strategy. MD has also been recognized as one of the top employers in North America that displays leadership and innovation in engaging its workforce (Achievers) for four years in a row.

Stephanie has dedicated her career to leading teams to create and execute people strategies that drive organizations forward. She has over 20 years of experience in both the private and public sectors where she has led business transformation through culture change, organization development and intrapreneurship.

Stephanie graduated with a Masters of Industrial Relations from the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. She lives in Ottawa with her husband and two children. She feels most alive when she's hiking and kayaking in the beautiful outdoors.



Glain Roberts-McCabe is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders. She created **The Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.